

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 76 (2013) 901 – 906

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

5th International Conference EDU-WORLD 2012 - Education Facing Contemporary World
Issues

Aspects concerning the learning of a foreign language grammar through discovery

Zarva Teodor, Doina Venera Munteanu,*

Colegiul tehnic Auto, Craiova, Romania

University of Pitesti, Tg. Din Vale street, no. 1, Pitesti, 11040, Romania

Abstract

The present paper approaches the issue of the assimilation a foreign language grammar in an unusual manner, different from the common one, namely through discovery. During the last period, this branch of linguistics –grammar – has been somehow neglected, the emphasis being laid, mainly on communication. We consider that language is not only a means of communication but also a subject pupils learn to know, since its knowledge is necessary for an appropriate usage of language. The paper presents the learning stages through discovery, the necessary conditions of this activity, its limits and some final conclusions.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).
Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the University of Pitesti, Romania

Grammar; discovery; stage; metalanguage;communication

1. Introduction

Actually, it is very difficult to clearly define the acquisition of a foreign language in terms of grammar. This linguistic component, which knew a period of disfavour, a certain crisis during the sixties and the seventies of the last century, seems to gain ground in the field of foreign languages teaching. This recursion demonstrates that the acquisition of grammar is a necessity for anyone who wishes to communicate in French or in English.

Needless to say that, learning a foreign language implies the acquisition of the respective grammar. Within a programme or of a foreign language course, it is necessary to set the modalities of developing the didactic activity: the place, the role, the importance of grammar in the teaching/learning activity. Nevertheless, the approach of the grammar system knew a certain evolution, as a result of the linguistic development, but also under the pressure of the specialists in didactics from the foreign languages domain. All these determined a

* Munteanu Doina Venera. Tel.: +4-0723-504-985

E-mail address: Maman0510@yahoo.com

fragmented approach of grammar, in such a way that the problem which faces us is *What grammar should be taught?*

The choice of a grammar and of the teaching methods are conditioned by several factors. Among these, we consider that the objectives of the course, the school environment and the pupils' characteristics should be taken into consideration.

These are the reasons which determined us to analyze this didactic undertaking, trying to highlight to which extent the learning of a foreign language can be based primarily on the acquisition of its grammar norms.

In 2003 Cuq and Gruca [1] admit that usually, four components of the communication competence are taken into account, among which the grammar one occupies a central place.

Within the framework of this competence, one can distinguish rules of usage (morphological and syntactical) and norms of use (which take into account the characteristics of the locutor, the social status, the language, etc.). To that effect, one must also consider the personality traits of the pupil (age, level of education, family background, the degree of mastering the maternal tongue), which determine the objectives to be attained.

We have enumerated the above mentioned factors since an authentic approach of the educational process must take into consideration the role of the pupil in transmitting information. Educators and specialists in didactics have been tried to promote an educational system which should start in transmitting information from the pupils' capacities, and these capacities to be developed through solving the newly appeared issues. Thus, learning is achieved within a structured, varied and dynamic programme in which activities are carefully selected and which appeals for the pupils' active and conscious participation.

This process can be denoted an active approach, in which the teacher acts as an organizer, formator and mediator between the information to be transmitted and the pupils, the aim being the acquisition of information and the formation of competences.

2. General presentation

At the French/English class, the language is not only a means of communication but also an object the pupils learn to know, since its knowledge is necessary for a correct speech. A special attention should be given to this aspect, as we do not teach abstract information about the language but we have to inspire pupils with a searching and interrogative spirit which should be part of their life. In fact, learning must be based on the linguistic competences the pupil must develop through the acquisition of the fundamental structures and mechanisms of a language.

From this perspective, the grammar knowledge transmitted through structures (sentences and groups), the mechanisms (subordination, the pronominal system) and the linguistic norms should not be transmitted as stereotypes. The pupils will discover them in an experimental process, similar to that from the sciences: physics, chemistry, biology.

The acquisition of grammar through discovery tries to determine the pupils to understand the main operating rules of the language, which rest upon the observation and experimental capacity, on reason and argument. Often associated with an inductive approach, it cannot be reduced to this, as it also appeals to deductive reasoning.

Learning through discovery allows pupils to acquire grammar knowledge progressively within a process made up of several stages.

3. The stages of learning through discovery

Before approaching the grammatical phenomenon in the classroom, it is important that pupils should know why it is necessary to have grammar knowledge and where they will use such knowledge. A concrete situation will determine the pupils to understand the difficulties met in applying grammar issues and the importance of their correct acquisition. Consequently, it is highly important that the problem to be studied (a syntactical

function, a sintagm) should be detected in the context, namely in a specially selected text. The pupils will notice the importance of the grammar issues on the communication level and will also notice their general functioning.

3.1 First stage: observation of the phenomenon

According to Chartrand in 1996 [2] in this stage the teacher proposes certain tasks to pupils, divided in working groups: to reassemble similar statements (texts, clauses, word groups), to classify them defining the criteria they had in view, to compare them with others, etc. The pupils will note the observations, but principally, the newly appeared problems, to which the team has not yet found the answer. They will present the results in front of the classroom. After a debate, guided by the teacher, the class decides which grammar issues will be continued and in which order.

The observation will develop following a set of examples called corpus. A corpus can be made up of sentences formulated by the pupils, sentences from literary texts or sentences from usual texts. The corpus can be prepared by the teacher or by the class and must take into account the complexity of the problems to be solved and the pupils' capacities.

3.2 Second stage: the formulation of hypotheses

In order to understand the operating mechanism of a certain language, a careful observation of the language phenomena proves to be very necessary. These should be submitted to different transformations which will be discovered by pupils. Simple syntactical procedures will be used, such as affixation, abstraction, substitution or displacement exercises within a statement. The pupils will examine the manner in which the statement reacts to certain changes and if these change or do not change its grammatical status.

The modification of the elements of the corpus allows the formulation of descriptive or explanatory hypotheses as regards the functioning of a grammar phenomenon, such as: the determinant and the adjective agree with the noun, the form of the relative pronoun depends on the syntactical function it has, the pronoun agrees in gender and number with the antecedent, the prepositional group is mobile, etc.

3.3 Third stage: the verification of the hypotheses

The same author, Chartrand [3] in the same mentioned year, 1996, introduced in the third stage the elaborated hypotheses which are validated by applying them on another corpus. If these prove to be true, one can formulate grammar rules and norms on their assumption.

3.4 Fourth stage: formulation of rules and the setting of procedures

The teams of pupils formulate in their own words the rule which derives from the studied aspects, comparing their statements with those of the other teams. Following a debate on the proposed formulations, the class works out the discovered rules with the teacher's help. These will be subsequently verified in different specialty papers (it is useful to have several specialty books in the classroom). Thus, they will conclude that the same grammar issue can have different linguistic descriptions.

3.5 Fifth stage: the practice stage

The pupils apply their conclusions to different linguistic contexts. The teacher presents a series of grammar exercises, which should be a challenge for them: at the beginning simpler problems and finally much more complex, aiming at forming the competences of oral expression and then of the written ones, the way being from simple to complex, as proposed by Chartrand [4] in 1996:

- exercises of acknowledging the grammar issue: identification, accentuation, analysis, illustration through a scheme;
- exercises of acknowledging the grammar phenomenon with a written justification of the acknowledgement criteria;
- exercises of sentence construction, using different changes in order to underline the functioning of the studied phenomenon;
- exercises of sentence correction or of limited draft (texts to be completed), with the justification of the effected changes;
- exercises of constructing texts, with precise definitions referring to the studied grammar issue.

This exercises stage proves to be necessary and has a variable duration. Its purpose is the consolidation of new information, on order to be verified by practice, to create automatisms and new procedures of problem solving. However, the stage in itself is not sufficient.

3.6 The sixth stage: the controlled use

This last stage is absolutely necessary. The teacher must guide the transfer of these new information in the activities of lecture and writing. The teacher and the pupil can evaluate the acquisition level of the studied problem together. We consider this activity as being an authentic formative evaluation. According to the results obtained at the formative evaluations, after a certain period of knowledge consolidation, a cumulative evaluation will be applied, as Chartrand [5]states in her book in 1996.

4. Basic conditions for the development of the learning through discovery

In order to be useful and efficient, this activity should be developed under certain conditions. It is absolutely essential to affiliate the studied linguistic phenomenon to its concrete existence in texts. The phenomenon must not be taken into consideration from a formal and normative point of view. The building of situations will allow the achievement of a coherence between lecture, writing and the linguistic activity in general. Moreover, the approach of linguistic problems needs a specific language in order to denote the aspects under debate.

The taking up of a common metalanguage in the classroom is absolutely necessary, even if its acquisition proves to be difficult for some pupils. The grammatical metalanguage used by the pupils will be the subject of a re-evaluation and a redefinition within the didactic activity. The metalanguage used in the classroom can be restricted, but it is important that its meaning should be less ambiguous and less polysemantic.

Besides that, a heuristic attitude should be primary in order to acquire accurate knowledge faster and decisively. Undoubtedly, this condition is hard to implement, because it can sometimes oppose the demands of the school system. The rhythm of developing the didactic activity must be alert and the whole programme must be taken into account, the same rhythm must be imposed to all pupils and no exploratory behaviour should be allowed. During this period, it is necessary to avoid the generalization of observations, the proposal of restrained or simplified corpuses, the presentation of counter-examples, as all these determine the pupils to supergeneralize the rules based on their assumptions. Also, it is necessary to take into account pupils' mistakes and possible suggestions, since these aspects can give useful information about their errors and deficiencies.

In the didactic undertaking, the teacher can change the pupils' attitude towards language progressively, towards knowledge and especially towards their approach. He can determine the fact that the manner of approach

must be modified permanently according to the concrete situation. The teacher must act in such a way that the didactic activity should not only transmit information but it also should build some new ones. In the didactic activity, the teacher updates his scientific representations and especially the representations concerning the methodical activity.

5. The limits of learning through discovery

According to some linguists specialized in didactics, the learning through discovery could have some limits: it needs much time, is inappropriate in the classrooms in case there are many allophone persons and is very demanding for the teachers.

The limits represent the hidden face of this activity. The fact that it needs much time must be seen in comparison to the obtained results. The time spent must allow the mastering of the basic grammatical mechanisms. Subjects must be chosen carefully so that the didactic undertaking should have a maximal efficiency.

As regards the grammatical agreement, the pupils must be helped to discover the rules. This is a long process which can be acquired only directly through doing numerous exercises of assignation. We have to mention the fact that during the French/English classes it is absolutely essential that all pupils should speak, write and read, or the activity is meaningless, according to Cuq and Gruca [6] in 2003.

This undertaking has a second obstacle which refers to the pupil's intuition for the maternal language. The evaluation of the grammar character of a certain statement and in the elaboration of a certain statement, intuition and the appeal to the maternal tongue are basic normal phenomena. Also, this type of learning can be much more difficult for the pupils to whom French/ English is not the language spoken outside classroom, who do not master the segment of spoken language and have a low level of the reading habit. In such context it is essential to approach problems which should be solved simultaneously in writing or orally, like the use of personal pronouns, to define clearly the objects of the learning through discovery and to use competences acquired in other languages. At the same time this type of approach stimulates the pupil, as he is determined to communicate constantly in the classroom, being able to rely on the teacher's feedback.

Conclusions

Learning a foreign language grammar through discovery can be interesting from many points of view. Practically, this encourages pupils to be active since the method represents a permanent search. They are made to experiment observation and manipulation procedures, they can also use them in other different situations, thus favouring autonomy. To a certain extent, this type of didactic activity represents an initiation in an experimental scientific undertaking. Therefore, the spirit of exactness develops and creative doubt increases. Moreover, the activity being performed by pupils themselves, under the teacher's guidance, it is necessarily adapted to their needs and abilities. Finally, it promotes the understanding of other points of view, which determine the pupils to form reasoning abilities.

Learning grammar through discovery can be demanding both for the teacher and for the pupils, but it helps us to understand to which extent this pedagogical approach has a formative effect for the pupils. Insisting upon a grammar problem, the pupils discover language as a system and observe the capacity of these investigation procedures, which are syntactical operations of affixation, abstraction, substitution or displacement. Undoubtedly, the teacher assumes certain risks. But it may prove much more interesting than to follow the strict way indicated by books and notebooks.

References

- [1] Cuq J. P, Gruca I. (2003), *Cours de didactique du français langue étrangère et seconde*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble :149

- [2] Chartrand S.G., (1996), *Apprendre la grammaire par la démarche active de découverte in Pour un nouvel enseignement de la grammaire*, Ed. Logiques, Québec : 200.
- [3] Chartrand S.G., (1996), *Apprendre la grammaire par la démarche active de découverte in Pour un nouvel enseignement de la grammaire*, Ed. Logiques, Québec : 201
- [4] Chartrand S.G., (1996), *Apprendre la grammaire par la démarche active de découverte in Pour un nouvel enseignement de la grammaire*, Ed. Logiques, Québec : 203
- [5] Chartrand S.G., (1996), *Apprendre la grammaire par la démarche active de découverte in Pour un nouvel enseignement de la grammaire*, Ed. Logiques, Québec : 204
- [6] Cuq J. P, Gruca I.(2003), *Cours de didactique du français langue étrangère et seconde*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble :345